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ELECTRONIC CHAT:
SOCIAL ISSUES ON INTERNET RELAY CHAT

Traditional forms of human interaction have their codes of etiquette. We are all brought up to behave according to the demands of social context. We know, as if instinctively, when it is appropriate to flirt, to be respectful, to be angry, or silent. The information with which we decide which aspects of our systems of social conduct are appropriate to our circumstances are more often physical than verbal. We do not need to be told that we are at a wedding, and should be quiet during the ceremony, in order to enact the code of etiquette that our culture reserves for such an occasion. 'Being cultured' says Greg Dening, 'we are experts in our semiotics ... we read sign and symbol [and] codify a thousand words in a gesture' (1988, 102). In interacting with other people, we rely on non-verbal information to delineate a context for our own contributions. Smiles, frowns, tones of voice, posture and dress – Geertz's 'significant symbols' – tell us more about the social context within which we are placed than do the statements of the people with whom we socialise (Geertz 1973, 45). Language does not express the full play of our interpersonal exchanges – which, continues Dening, 'are expressed in terms of address, in types of clothing, in postures and facial expressions, in appeals to rules and ways of doing things' (1988, 100). The words themselves tell only half the story – it is their presentation that completes the picture.

These aspects of human communication are taken for granted by us all – yet technology has the potential to challenge them. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) subverts many of our assumptions about the practice of interactive communication, for it relies only upon words as a channel of meaning. This inherent limitation to the medium has several consequences. 'Computer-mediated communication has at least two interesting characteristics' write Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, '(a) a paucity of social context information and (b) few widely shared norms governing its use' (Kiesler et al 1984, 1126). Users of these systems are unable to rely on the conventions of gesture and nuances of tone to provide social feedback. They cannot rely upon the conventional systems of interaction if they are to make sense to one another. Words, as we use them in speech, fail to express what we really mean once they are deprived of the subtleties of the non-verbal cues that we assume will accompany them. The sense of social context is lost. The standards of behaviour that are normally decided upon by non-verbal cues are not clearly indicated when information is purely textual. Not only are smiles and frowns lost in the translation of synchronous speech to pure text, but factors of environment are unknown to interlocutors. It is not immediately apparent, in a computer-mediated conversation, what forms of social etiquette are appropriate.

Given these limitations, how do computer-mediated interlocutors relate to one another? If the problems presented by the medium were insurmountable, then social systems would not be able to form. Yet they have – computer-mediated communities do exist. One such example is that seen on Internet Relay Chat, the synchronous conferencing facility available on the Internet computer network.

Internet Relay Chat – IRC – allows many hundreds of people to communicate in real time over the international computer network.

Users issue commands to the IRC program to create 'channels', virtual spaces to talk within. An unlimited number of channels, which are known by any name which users care to create them under, can exist simultaneously. IRC supports many commands which make it an extremely flexible environment; however, not all users have access to all of them – there are degrees of privilege. The creator of a channel, the 'channel operator' or 'chanop', has the power to control access to that channel, and can 'kick' unwanted people off it. IRC operators – 'opers' – maintain the IRC network connections and are able to control access to the entire system, and may 'kill' an unwanted user's connection to IRC.

Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire have described computer-mediated communication as having four distinctive features: an absence of regulating feedback, dramaturgical weakness, few social status cues and social anonymity. IRC is subject to all these forces – yet a social system has evolved. Conventional systems for regulating interaction may fall apart when communication is computer-mediated – yet IRC has been in existence since 1988, and is (barring technical mishaps) in continuous use. My interest is to describe how this social system works. How do users react to the ways in which computer-mediated communication deconstructs the conventional boundaries defining social interaction? What alternative methods are developed to sustain understanding? How do users of IRC make sense of their environment and each other?

Anonymity

Users of Internet Relay Chat are not generally known by their 'real' names. The convention on IRC is to choose a nickname under which to interact. The nicknames – or 'nicks' as they are referred to – chosen by IRC users range from conventional first names such as 'Peggy' and 'Matthew', to inventive and evocative pseudonyms such as 'Tmbrwolf', 'Pplater', 'LuxYacht' and 'WildWoman'. The information which one user can gain about others on IRC consists of the names by which they choose to be known and the Internet 'address' of the computer from which they are accessing the IRC program. The first is easily changed. IRC allows users to change their nicknames as often as they wish. The second

is not so easily manipulated, but is still open to tampering provided that the user has some technical skill. Essentially there is nothing that one IRC user can ascertain about another – beyond the fact that they have access to the Internet – that is not manipulable by that user.

Our efforts at self-presentation usually assume that we cannot change the basics of our appearance. Physical characteristics, although open to cosmetic or fashionable manipulation, are basically unalterable. What we look like, we have to live with. This is, however, not the case on IRC. How an IRC user 'looks' to another user is entirely dependant upon information they choose to give. It is possible to by-pass the boundaries delineated by cultural constructs of beauty, ugliness and fashion. Users can appear to be, quite literally, whoever they wish.

The changes that a user might make to his or her perceived identity can be small, a matter of realising in others' minds a desire to be attractive, impressive and popular:

> <BabyDoll> Well, I gotta admit, I shave a few lbs off of my wieght when I tell the guys on irc what i look like ...[1]

However, the anonymity of IRC can provide more than a means to 'fix' minor problems of appearance – one of the most fascinating aspects of this computer-mediated fluidity of cultural boundaries is the possibility of gender-switching. Kiesler and Sproull note that 'unless first names are used as well as last names, gender information is also missing on computer-mediated communication systems and this is certainly the case on IRC, where the entirety of a user's social interface is self-created (1986, 1497).

The structure of IRC destroys the usually all but insurmountable confines of sex. Gender is self-selected – it is easy for a user to select a nickname that suggests the gender that they prefer. This freedom opens up a wealth of possibilities, for gender is one of the more 'sacred' institutions in our society, a quality whose fixity is so assumed that enacted or surgical reassignment has and does involve complex rituals, taboos, procedures and stigmas. This fixity, and the common equation of gender with sex, becomes problematic when gender reassignment can be effected by a few touches at a keyboard. IRC becomes the arena for experimentation with gender specific social roles:

<Barf> Umm, I've gender switched once or twice for about 2 hours or so ...

<Marion> how did you find being perceived as female?

<Barf> I did find it mildly irritating that I should get so much attention and be immediately fixated as a sex object simply by pretending to be female.

Individual users differ widely in the attitude they take toward the possibility for gender concealment. Some view it as 'part of the game', others are hostile toward users who gender switch:

<saro> KAREN IS A BOY

<saro> KAREN IS A BOY

<saro> KAREN IS A BOY

<SmilyFace> saro: so?????????

<Karen> yes saro I heard you

<FuzzyB> Takes a relaxed place beside Karen offering her her favourite drink.

Whether an individual user enjoys the games that come of this potential, or is resentful and wary of them, exploitation of it is an accepted part of the 'virtual reality' – a popular catch-phrase amongst users of IRC.

The anonymity provided by IRC makes it possible for users to play with aspects of behaviour and identity that are not normally possible. The chance to escape the assumed boundaries of gender, race, and age enable people to deconstruct their own identity, and to recreate it in a game of interaction in which there are few rules but those that the users create themselves. The possibility of such experimentation governs the expectations of all users of IRC. Some find the lack of fixity intimidating; others show a willingness to accept this phenomenon, and to join in the games that can be played within it. However, either by demanding that they be observed, or by flouting them, the users of IRC show the degree to which the medium challenges and obscures the boundaries between some of our most deeply felt cultural significances.

Disinhibition

Researchers of human behaviour on computer-mediated communication systems have often noted that users of such systems tend to behave in a more uninhibited manner than they would in face-to-face encounters.

Kiesler and Sproull state that computer-mediated behaviour 'is relatively uninhibited and nonconforming' (1986, 1498). Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire have observed that 'people in computer-mediated groups were more uninhibited than they were in face-to-face groups' (1984, 1129). Rice and Love suggest that 'disinhibition' may occur 'because of the lack of social control that nonverbal cues provide' (1987, 89).

Internet Relay Chat reflects this observation. Computer-mediated communication is less bound by conventions than is face-to-face interaction. With little regulating feedback to govern behaviour, users behave in ways that would not generally be acceptable when relating to people who are essentially total strangers. Protected by the anonymity of the computer medium, and with few social context cues to indicate 'proper' ways to behave, users are able to express themselves in ways that social inhibition would generally suppress:

<bob> by nature I'm shy ...

<bob> normally wouldn't talk about such thingsw if you met me face to face

<bob> thus the network is good ...

Users of IRC often form strong friendships. Without social context cues to inhibit people – to encourage shyness – computer-mediated interlocutors will often 'open up' to each other to a great degree. Personal relationships amongst participants in computer-mediated communication systems can often be deep and highly emotional. Hiltz and Turoff have noted that some participants in such systems 'come to feel that their very best and closest friends are members of their electronic group, whom they seldom or never see' (1978, 101). 'Net.romances', long distance romantic relationships carried out over IRC, can result from the increased tendency for participants in CMC systems to be uninhibited:[2]

<Lara> The more we talked, the more we discovered we had in common ...

<Lara> I told him that I was starting to get a crush on him ...

<Lara> Anyway, it's grown and grown over the months.

<David> A few mishaps, but we've overcome them, to bounce back stronger than ever.

<Lara> And, as you know, we'll be getting together for 3 weeks at the end of November, to see if we're as wonderful as we think we are.

Such expressions of feeling are not in any way thought to be shallow or ephemeral. Far from being unsatisfactory for 'more interpersonally involving communication tasks, such as getting to know someone', as Hiemstra (1982, 880) describes researchers of CMC behaviour as having characterised the medium, IRC has in this instance fostered an extremely emotional bond between two people. Users of IRC are able to so dispense with the conventional boundaries surrounding communication, and cross-cultural exchange, to form deep friendships, and even have love-affairs, with people whom they have never met.

Net.romances display computer-mediated relationships at their most idyllic. The safety of anonymity in the chat channel can 'reduce self-consciousness and promote intimacy' between people who might not otherwise have had the chance to become close (Kiesler et al 1984, 1127). However, disinhibition and increased freedom from social norms have another side. They can also encourage 'flaming', characterised by Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire as the gratuitous and uninhibited making of 'remarks containing swearing, insults, name calling, and hostile comments' (1984, 1129). Anonymity makes the possibility of punishment for transgression of cultural mores appear to be limited. Protected by terminals and separated by distance, the sanction of physical violence is irrelevant, although, as I shall discuss later, social sanctions *are* present and often in a textual form that apes physical violence. The safety of anonymous expression of hostilities and obscenities that would otherwise incur social sanctions, encourages some people to use IRC as a forum for airing their resentment of individuals or groups in a blatantly uninhibited manner. 'Wallops'– messages written by users to all operators online – often contain users' requests for help in the face of abuse:

!Venice! Bashers have taken over #gblf ... we could use some help ...

!radv*! Comment: – Gay_Bashe:#gblf – FUCK ALL OF BUTT FUCKING, ASS

LICKING, CHICKEN SHIT BIOLOGICAL DISlASTERS[3]

Not all uninhibited behaviour on IRC is either so negative or so positive. Much of the opportunity for uninhibited behaviour is invested by users of IRC in sexual experimentation. The usually culturally-enforced boundaries between sexual and platonic relationships are challenged in computer-mediated circumstances. With norms of etiquette obscured by the lack of social context cues, the apparent safety given by anonymity and distance allow users to ignore cultural codes regarding sexual behaviour and the conventions defining polite conversation with strangers:

<Han> does this compu-sex stuff really happen?

<Lola> *smooch*

<Han> .....are oyu horny today at all ;)?

<Lola> today? it's the middle of the night where I am... as for the adjective, well, do what you can ;-)

<Han> mmmmmmm......when did you last get off?

Such behaviour is often referred to as 'net.sleazing'. Sexual experimentation is a popular Internet game, perhaps because the Internet primarily serves educational institutions and thus students who are generally in their late teens or early twenties. Young people, coming to terms with their sexuality in the 'real world', might find that the freedom of 'virtual reality' allows them to safely engage in sexual experimentation. Ranging from flirtation to 'compu-sex', IRC provides a medium for the safe expression of a 'steady barrage of typed testosterone' (Barlow 1990 46).

Disinhibition and the lack of sanctions encouraging self-regulation lead to extremes of behaviour on IRC. Users express hate, love, intimacy and anger, employing the freedom of the electronic medium to air views and engage in relationships that would in other circumstances be deemed unacceptable. This 'freedom' does not mean that IRC is an idyllic environment. Play with social conventions can indeed lead to greater positive affect between people, as it has between 'David' and 'Lara', and to greater personal fulfilment for some users. It can also, however, create a

violent chaos in which people feel 'free' to act upon prejudices, even hatreds, that might otherwise be socially controlled.

Shared significances

'Culture can be understood as a set of solutions devised by a group of people to meet specific problems posed by situations they face in common' (Van Maanen & Barley 1985, 33). This definition of culture owes much to Geertz's understanding of culture as a 'system of meanings that give significance to shared behaviours which must be interpreted from the perspective of those engaged in them' (Meyer & Thomas 1990, 34). 'Culture' includes not only the systems and standards adopted by a group for 'perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting', but also includes the 'rules and symbols of interpretation and discourse' utilised by the members of the group (Meyer & Thomas 1990, 34). Culture, says Geertz, is 'a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call 'programs') – for the governing of behaviour' (1973, 44). In this sense the users of IRC constitute a culture, a community. They are commonly faced with the problems posed by the medium's inherent deconstruction of conventional models of social interaction which are based on physical proximity.

The measures which users of the IRC system have devised to meet their common problems are the markers of their community, their common culture. These measures fall into two distinct categories. Firstly, users of IRC have devised systems of symbolism and textual significance to ensure that they achieve understanding despite the lack of more usual channels of communication. Secondly, a variety of social sanctions have arisen amongst the IRC community in order to discipline users who disrupt the integrity of those shared systems of interpretation.

As Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire have suggested, the chief problem faced by electronic conferees is the 'dramaturgical weakness of electronic media' (1984, 1125). As Hiltz and Turoff have reported, users of CMC systems have developed ways of sending computerised screams, hugs and kisses (cited in Kiesler et al 1984, 1125). This textual substitution for traditionally non-verbal information is a highly stylised, yet artistic, procedure that is central to the construction of an IRC community. Common practice on IRC is to simply verbalise physical cues, for instance literally typing 'hehehe' when conventional methods of communication would call for laughter. It is a recognised convention to denote the description of physical actions or reactions by presenting them between asterisks:

<Wizard> Come, brave Knight! Let me cast a spell of protection on you..... Oooops – wrong spell! You don;t mind being green for a while – do you???

<Prince> Lioness: please don't eat him...

<storm> *shivers from the looks of lioness*

<Knight> Wizard: Not at all.

<Bel_letre> *hahahah*

<Lioness> Very well, your excellency. *looks frustrated*

<Prince> *falls down laughing*

<Knight> Wizard: as long as I can protect thou ass, I'd be utter grateful! :-)

<Bel_letre> *Plays a merry melody*

<storm> *walks over to lioness and pats her paw*

<Wizard> *Dispells the spells cast on Knight!*

<Wizard> Knight: Your back to normal!!!

<Prince> *brings a pallet of meat for Lioness*

<Lioness> *licks Storm*

<storm> *Looking up* Thank You for not eating me!

This example, involving an online fantasy role-playing game, shows a high concentration of verbalised physical actions and reactions. This density of virtually physical cues is somewhat abnormal, but it amply demonstrates the extent to which users of the IRC system feel it important to create a physical context within which their peers can interpret their behaviour.

Members of the IRC community often utilise a 'shorthand' for the description of physical condition. They (in common with users of other computer-mediated communication systems such as Usenet and electronic mail) have developed a system of presenting textual characters as

representations of physical action. Commonly known as 'smileys', CMC users employ alphanumeric characters and punctuation symbols to create strings of highly emotively charged keyboard art:

:-) or :)	a smiling face, as viewed side-on
;-) or ;)	a winking, smiling face
:-(or :(	an 'unsmiley': an unhappy face
:-(*)	someone about to throw up
:-P	someone sticking out their tongue
>:-O	someone screaming in fright, their hair standing on end
:-&	someone whose lips are sealed

These 'emoticons', as they are known on the Internet, are many and various. Although the most commonly used is the plain smiling face – used to denote pleasure or amusement, or to soften a sarcastic comment – it is common for IRC users to develop their own emoticons, adapting the symbols available on the standard keyboard to create minute and essentially ephemeral pieces of textual art to represent their own virtual actions and responses. Such inventiveness and lateral thinking demands skill. Successful communication within IRC depends on the use of such conventions as verbalised action and the use of emoticons. The creation of a community on IRC depends on the users' ability to manipulate these tools. The users who can succinctly and graphically portray themselves to the rest of the IRC usership are the ones who are able to create that community.

The corollary of Geertz's definition of culture is that groups of people who *fail* to communicate do not compose a common culture. If meaning is lost in transition from speaker to addressee, then community is lost – 'undirected by culture patterns – organised systems of significant symbols – man's behaviour would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless' (Geertz 1973, 46). In order for IRC users to constitute a community it is necessary for them to contrive a method to circumvent the possibility of loss of intended meaning of statements. Verbalisation of physical

condition is that method. Interlocutors will describe what their reactions to specific statements would be were they in physical contact. Without some way of compensating for the inherent lack of social context cues in computer-mediated communication, IRC would get no further than the deconstruction of conventional social boundaries. The textual cues utilised on IRC provide the symbols of interpretation and discourse that the users of IRC have devised to 'meet specific problems posed by situations they face in common'. Without these textual cues to substitute for non-verbal language, the users of IRC would fail to constitute a community – with them, they do.

Social sanctions

The threads holding IRC together as a community are made up of shared modes of understanding, and the concepts shared range from the light-hearted and fanciful to the highly personal. The success of any community is dependant upon the degree of voluntary or enforced co-operation between its members. IRC is no exception to this rule. Special problems arise on IRC, not the least of which is the tendency for users to freely express potentially disruptive emotions. Special solutions have been devised to meet these problems – community on IRC is both upheld by convention and enforced by structure.

One of the sites of tension and control on IRC is the issue of nicknames. The program demands that each user offer a unique name to the system, to be used in their interaction with other users. It is common for users to prefer and consistently use one nickname, and one of the greatest taboos on IRC is the use of another's chosen nickname. The 'illegitimate' use of nicknames can cause anger on the part of their 'rightful' users and sometimes deep feelings of guilt on the part of the perpetrators. This public announcement was made by an IRC user to the Usenet newsgroup 'alt.irc', a forum for asynchronous discussion of IRC:

> I admit to having used the nickname 'allison' on several occasions, the name of an acquaintance and 'virtual' friend at another university. Under this nick, I talked on channels #hottub and #gblf, as well as with a few individuals privately. This was a deceptive, immature thing to

do, and I am both embarrassed and ashamed of myself. I wish to apologize to everyone I misled, particularly users 'badping' and 'kired'...

I am truly sorry for what I have done, and regret ever having used IRC, though I think it has the potential to be a wonderful forum and means of communication. It certainly makes the world seem a small place. I shall never invade IRC with a false nick or username again.

The physical aspect of IRC may be only virtual, but the emotional aspect is actual. IRC is not a 'game' in any light-hearted sense – it can inspire deep feelings of guilt and responsibility. It is also clear that users' acceptance of IRC's potential for the deconstruction of social boundaries is limited by their reliance on the construction of communities. Experimentation ceases to be acceptable when it threatens the delicate balance of trust that holds IRC together. The uniqueness of names, their consistent use, and respect for – and expectation of – their integrity, is crucial to the development of online communities.

The sanctions available to the IRC community for use against errant members are both social and structural. The degree to which members feel, as 'allison' did, a sense of shame for actions which abuse the systems of meaning which constitute the IRC community, is related to the degree to which they participate in the deconstruction of traditional social conventions. By being uninhibited, by experimenting with cultural norms of identity and trust, 'allison' became a part of a social network that encourages self-exposure by simulating anonymity and therefore invulnerability. In this case, the systems of meaning created by the users of IRC in response to that disinhibition and deconstruction have become conventions with a terrorising authority over those who participate in their use. As I shall describe, users of IRC who flout the conventions of the medium are ostracised, banished from the community. The way to redemption for such erring members is through a process of guilt and redemption; through, in 'allison's' case, a 'public' ritual of self-accusation, confession, repentance and atonement.

IRC supports mechanisms for the enforcement of acceptable behaviour. Channel operators – 'chanops' or 'chops' – have access to the 'kick' command, which throws a specified user out of the given channel. IRC operators – 'opers' – have the ability to 'kill' users by breaking the computer network link that connects them to IRC. It is then necessary for the user to reconnect their IRC program to the network. The code of etiquette for doing so is outlined in the documentation that comes with the IRC program:

> Obnoxious users had best beware the operator who's fast on the /kill command. '/kill nickname' blows any given nickname completely out of the chat system. Obnoxiousness is not to be tolerated. But operators do not use /kill lightly (Kleinpaste 1990).

There is a curious paradox in the concomitant usage of the words 'obnoxious' and 'kill'. Obnoxiousness seems a somewhat trivial term to warrant the use of such textually violent commands as /kick and /kill. The word trivialises the degree to which abusive behaviour, deceit, and shame can play a part in interaction on Internet Relay Chat. The existence of such negative behaviour and emotions is played down, denigrated – what is stressed is the measures that can be taken by the 'authorities' – the chanops and opers – on IRC. Violators of the integrity of the IRC community are marginalised, outcast, described so as to seem insignificant, but their potential for disrupting the IRC community is suggested by the emotive strength of the words with which they are punished. The terms 'killing' and 'kicking' substitute for their physical counterparts – IRC users may be safe from physical threat, but the community sanctions of violence and restraint are there, albeit in textualised form.

Operators have a convention of justifying their 'kills'. It is customary for an operator issuing such a command to make known the reason for his or her action by adding a comment to the 'kill message' that fellow operators and the victim will receive:

*** Notice – Received KILL message for 14982784 from MaryD (Obscene Dumps!!!)

*** Notice – Received KILL message for mic from mgp (massive abusive channel dumping involving lots of ctrl-gs and baybashing, amongst other almost as obnoxious stuff)

*** Notice – Received KILL message for JP from Cyberman (repeatedly ignoring warnings to stop nickname abuse)[4]

Operators have considerable power within IRC. They can control not only an individual's access to IRC, but are also responsible for maintaining the network connections that enable IRC programs at widely geographically separated sites to interact with each other. Whether this power is abused is a contentious issue. While operators are careful to present their kills as justifiable in the eyes of their peers, this is often not felt to be the case by their victims. Accusations of prejudice and injustice abound, and the hierarchical status quo is often summarily reinforced:

!JP! fucking stupid op cybman /killd me – think ya some kind of net.god? WHy not _ask_ people in the channle i'm in if I'm annoying them before blazing away????

*** Notice – Received KILL message for JP from Cyberman (abusive wallops)

Kills can also be seen as unjustified by other operators, and the operator whose actions are questioned by his peers is likely to be killed himself:

*** Notice – Received KILL message for Alfred from Kamikaze (public insults are not appreciated)

*** Notice – Received KILL message for Kamikaze from dave (yes, but they are allowed)

The potential for tension between operators of IRC is often diffused into a game. 'Killwars', episodes in which opers repeatedly kill each other, often happen. There is rarely overt hostility in these 'wars' – the attitude taken is usually one of ironic realisation of the responsibilities and powers that opers have, mixed with bravado and humour – an effort to parody those same powers and responsibilities:

!puppy*! ok! one frivolous kill coming up! :D

!Maryd*! Go puppy! :*)

*** Notice – Received KILL message for puppy from Glee (and here it IS! :)

!Chas*! HAHA :)

*** Notice – Received KILL message for Glee from Maryd (and here's another)

*** Notice – Received KILL message for Maryd from Chas (and another)

... [fifteen more kills deleted] ...

!Alfred! thank you for a marvellously refreshing kill war; this completes my intro into the rarefied and solemn IRCop godhood.

The ideals of authority and freedom are often in opposition on IRC, as the newly invented social conventions of the IRC community attempt to deal with emotions and actions in ways that emulate the often violent social sanctions of the 'real world'. The potential for tension and hostility between users and opers arising over the latter's use of power can erupt into anger and abuse. Disagreement between operators over their implementation of power can result in the use of operators' powers against each other. The games that are played with killing express a realisation of the existence of these elements in the hierarchical nature of IRC culture and serve to diffuse that tension – at least among operators.

The IRC community

Users of IRC treat the medium as virtually free space, in which they can act out fantasies, challenge social norms, and exercise aspects of their personality that would be inhibited under non-computer-mediated circumstances. The medium itself blocks some of the socially inhibiting institutions that users would, under other circumstances, be operating within. Cultural indicators – of social position, of age and authority, of personal appearance – are relatively weak in a computer-mediated context. They might be inferred, but they are not evident. Internet Relay Chat leaves it open to users to create virtual replacements for these social cues – IRC interaction involves the creation of replacements and substitutes for physical cues, and the construction of social hierarchies and positions of authority. That it is possible for users of IRC to do this is due to the ways in which the medium deconstructs conventional boundaries constraining

interaction and conventional institutions of interpersonal relationships. It is the freedom from those conventions that allows IRC users to create their own, and to become a cohesive community.

This community is 'created through symbolic strategies and collective beliefs' (Meyer & Thomas 1990, 61). IRC users share a common language, a shared web of verbal and textual significances that are substitutes for, and yet distinct from, the shared networks of meaning of the wider community. Users of IRC share a vocabulary and a system of understanding that is unique and therefore defines them as constituting a distinct culture. This community is self-regulating, having systems of hierarchy and power that allow for the punishment of transgressors of those systems of behaviour and meaning. Members of the community feel a sense of responsibility for IRC – most respect the conventions of their culture, and those who don't are either marginalised or reclaimed through guilt and atonement.

The symbolic identity – the virtual reality – of the world of computer-mediated communication is a rich and diverse culture comprised of highly specialised skills, language, mechanisms of control, and unifying symbolic meanings.

Endnotes

1. All quotes from IRC sessions are taken from logs kept during 1991. These logs were either kept by myself, or given to me by the log-keeper. In all cases names have been changed to preserve anonymity. The original spelling and grammar have been preserved.

2. Users of the Internet often refer to social phenomena occurring on the system by using the format 'net.<phenomenon>' – thus 'net.sleazing' and 'net.romance'.

3. #gblf is a popular channel on IRC, so popular that it is in almost – that is, barring technical mishaps – permanent use. The acronym stands for 'gays, bisexuals, lesbians and friends.' Other 'permanent' IRC channels are #hottub, known for flirtatious chat, and #initgame, in which users play games of 'twenty questions'.

4. This log was taken by an IRC operator – these lines consist of 'notices' sent by operators to all other operators online. They are read as follows: the first 'notice' announces that a user named '14982784' has been banished from the IRC system by an operator named 'MaryD', the second that a user named 'mic' was 'killed' by an operator named 'mgp.' '/kill notices' are accompanied by technical information regarding the details of the path over the computer network that the command travelled – these details, being lengthy and irrelevant to my purpose, I have omitted.

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